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## Turbulence Strikes: Whose Mask Goes on First?

A hospital in which I have spent a lot of time is undergoing major funding cuts. This community resource is part of a small health system, and it has earned a great reputation, especially recent years. Today, its leaders are making every effort to maintain its quality of care while taking anything remotely “excessive” out of its budget.

I have worked with many of this organization’s nursing leaders, and I can attest to their skill, persistence, and commitment to doing their very best work. They are an impressive group. Much as I would like to attribute their fine contributions to their innate leadership knowledge or even wisdom they have enhanced as a result of our work together, I believe that the largest portion of their success is due to another factor altogether.

Their CNO is a fantastic role model. Before I even met Courtney, I knew this about her. I could tell by the way people talked about her. My introduction to the hospital was through another senior leader who continually made reference to Courtney. I heard how universally she was revered in the organization, by the nurses and the other departments. I couldn’t help but notice that she seemed to be on a pedestal. So when I was about to meet with her for the first time, I was quite curious.

When I arrived in her office, I was greeted by a gracious and to-the-point executive. Courtney was welcoming and quite supportive of the leadership work to which we were all committing for the coming months. I was impressed enough in that first session, but it wasn’t until later that I truly appreciated why she had earned the respect of nearly all the leaders around her.

It was true that Courtney espoused most of the adages we hear about leading others in turbulent times: foster great collaboration; encourage innovation; use the lessons of the present, past, and future; retain talent; and the like. But was this what was so special about Courtney? Was it really her way of working with others that was remarkable? I was skeptical. I wanted to learn much more about her leadership style.

I was fortunate enough to work closely with her and her team for a number of months, and I got to know what was uniquely significant about

Courtney’s approach to managing in difficult times. In addition to using proven best practices for managing people in tough times, *she paid equal attention to how she managed herself.*

Courtney knew that her very presence—her “leadership wake”—dramatically impacted those around her. Here are some of the ways in which she managed herself during times of significant stress for her managers, the staff, and the whole organization.

1. *She let her values guide her.* She knew what was important, and she imparted that message consistently to her team. As an example, when difficult budget decisions had to be made, Courtney relied heavily on her values and those of the organization. She encouraged her team members to do the same. After all, her team members were producing wonderful results for their patients; Courtney had complete trust in the values of the leaders in her circle.
2. *She managed her own fear.* Although Courtney was experiencing the same personal financial challenges that many of her direct reports experienced, she did what she could to actively manage them. She also realized that the stock market and the value of her home were largely out of her control, so she did not focus on those minute-to-minute measures of financial well-being. She realized that if she gave a lot of her attention to fear, it would escalate and consume her energy. She knew she needed to focus on managing the *hospital’s* most significant challenges, so she would not give in to worrisome daily financial news.
3. *She managed others’ fear, to the extent that anyone else can do that.* She did this by telling the truth about what the organization was facing. In the months of my work with Courtney and her team, I never heard her mince words or put varnish on a difficult message. She simply told the truth. At the same time, she had a positive approach to that truth. Often her words were simple: “We can do this.” Courtney resolutely believed in the organization’s ability to perform, even in the most trying of times.

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When she said “we can do it,” there was no doubt that she meant it.

4. *She did her best to manage and remain conscious of her own internal “leadership seductions.”* These could also be thought of as manifestations of her “shadow,” that dark side we all possess. She knew the best antidotes were enough sleep, self-care, and forgiveness for others and herself. Courtney’s intention was to take full ownership of the aspects of her life she truly could control while letting the rest go. For her, examples of these seductions were easy to spot: she might experience an impulse to be curt with others who weren’t able to move ahead positively, or she might feel impatient with people who were impeding rather than enhancing progress. She might even be angry with other hospital leaders who were simply too fearful to stay focused on their vision of providing high-quality healthcare.
5. *She paid attention to shifts in her own mood.* Courtney was familiar with what Rick Maurer mentioned in his newsletter “Leading in Turbulent Times.”<sup>1</sup> In times of stress and pressure, it is important to pay attention to what Maurer calls “the weather,” shifts in organizational conditions that can change quickly. Courtney heeded this guidance as it applied to others in the organization and as it applied to her. She realized that her own fear or other manifestations of her shadow could emerge from time to time. Courtney resolved to notice this tendency and manage it when it surfaced.
6. *Courtney did her best to grow comfortable with “not knowing.”* She focused on becoming at ease with ambiguity, learning in the moment, and making prompt decisions with enough—if not perfect—information. She also gave explicit permission for the nurse leaders that reported to her to do the same.

Courtney would not want to see herself painted with a brush that suggests perfection. In a way, her greatest strength is her ability to be aware of, learn from, and grow with her own imperfections. Most of the people with whom she works don’t know that she focuses on

managing these parts of herself. What they do know is how she shows up every day in the organization and how she relates as their leader. At the beginning, I said that her team members admire her. That’s because Courtney is the kind of leader that many of our organizations need now, more than ever. I firmly believe that, in our own individual ways, we all have the potential to lead just as effectively as Courtney does.

#### Reference

1. Maurer R. Leading in turbulent times. 2008. <http://www.beyondresistance.com/LeadingToday.pdf>. Accessed March 16, 2009.

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1541-4612/2009/ \$ See front matter  
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doi:10.1016/j.mnl/2009.03.005